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Alberto Godioli\*

# Walking Tours, Subjective Maps, and Spatial Justice: Urban and Non-Urban Spaces in Contemporary Italian Literature

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the representation of urban, suburban, and rural spaces in contemporary Italian literature, by examining a corpus of fifteen titles published between 2004 and 2015. 2004 saw the start of the Laterza series *Contromano*, which marked a significant increase in the amount of texts providing literary tours or maps of the most various areas of Italy; for this reason, that year has been chosen as the starting point of the present investigation. Particular attention is paid to three aspects: 1) The use of walking as a way to achieve a more personal relation to the “topographical system” (De Certeau), as opposed to the abstractions underlying urban design; 2) The questioning of the boundaries between centre, periphery and countryside, as well as those surrounding areas inhabited by ethnic minorities; 3) The emphasis on abandoned or neglected spaces, usually leading to a broader reflection on the human costs of neoliberal modernity. In conclusion, despite their diversity, all of the selected texts aim to bridge the gap between our subjective experience of space on the one hand, and the abstract processes regulating our lives on the other; in order to do so, they attempt to unveil a hidden rhetoric of space, whereby a given place can become a metaphor or a synecdoche for broader phenomena.

**Keywords:** space, walking, maps, urban planning, spectrality, psychogeography, periphery, spatial justice, community, experientiality

## 1 Italian literature and the spatial turn

The representation of space in contemporary Italian literature has been the subject of growing critical attention over the last decade.<sup>1</sup> This trend

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. for instance: *Nuove (e vecchie) geografie letterarie nell'Italia del XXI secolo*, eds. Silvia Contarini, Margherita Marras and Giuliana Pias (Firenze: Cesati, 2016); *La geografia del racconto. Sguardi interdisciplinari sul paesaggio urbano nella narrativa italiana contemporanea*, eds. Davide

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corresponds, in fact, with a significant increase in the number of literary works by Italian authors variously falling under the category of place writing – suffice it to mention the Laterza series *Contromano*, active since 2004 and currently featuring over 90 “racconti e guide curiose di città, reportages, libri di viaggio, storie inconsuete di luoghi, di cose, di gente” [tales and curious guides about cities, reportages, travel books, unusual stories on places, things, and people].<sup>2</sup> The foregrounding of space in both Italian literature and literary studies is best understood, of course, as part of a much broader phenomenon, which is generally referred to as *spatial turn* – a term designating the increased attention to spatiality and situatedness across the social sciences and the humanities, as first exemplified by a series of highly influential authors in the 1950s and 1960s (from Bachelard to Foucault and Lefebvre), which paved the way for further developments in this direction from the Nineties onwards.<sup>3</sup>

The present paper will focus on a text type that has only recently gained scholarly recognition, at least with regard to the Italian context – namely works based on the lived experience of space, as conveyed through the perspective of one or more focalizers.<sup>4</sup> This experience often takes the shape of a walking tour, and might focus on urban, suburban, and rural spaces alike. I have been mainly working with a corpus of fifteen titles which were all published between 2004 and 2015, and can be classified as follows:

- (1) Works focussing on the urban and suburban areas of Milan and Rome. Milan: Aldo Nove, *Milano non è Milano* [Milan is not Milan], 2004; Luca Doninelli, *Il crollo delle aspettative. Scritti insurrezionali su Milano* [The fall of expectations. Insurrectional writings on Milan], 2005; Maurizio

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Papotti and Franco Tomasi (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2014); *Beyond the Piazza: Public and Private Spaces in Modern Italian Culture*, ed. Simona Storch (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2013); *Belpaese? La rappresentazione del paesaggio nella letteratura e nel cinema dell'Italia contemporanea*, eds. Luca Poggi and Paolo Chirumbolo (New York: Mellen Press, 2012); Eleonora Conti, “Geografie identitarie nella narrativa italiana degli anni Duemila,” *Italogramma* 4 (2012): 165–175.

<sup>2</sup> Series description taken from Laterza’s official website, accessed November 5, 2016, [http://www.laterza.it/index.php?option=com\\_tag&task=tag&tag=contromano](http://www.laterza.it/index.php?option=com_tag&task=tag&tag=contromano).

<sup>3</sup> For a general overview of the spatial turn across various disciplines, see in particular: Robert Tally, *Spatiality* (London: Routledge, 2013); *Il senso dello spazio. La spatial turn nei metodi e nelle teorie letterarie*, ed. Flavio Sorrentino (Roma: Armando, 2010); *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Barney Warf and Santa Arias (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> The two most systematic overviews to date are Valentino Baldi, “Raccontare la città. Narrativa breve e spazio urbano nella letteratura italiana contemporanea,” *Allegoria* 69–70 (2014): 61–74, and Davide Papotti, “Racconti di città: strategie di interpretazione urbana nella collana ‘Contromano,’” in Papotti and Tomasi, *La geografia del racconto*, 35–58.

- Cucchi, *La traversata di Milano* [Traversing Milan], 2007; Gianni Biondillo and Michele Monina, *Tangenziali. Due viandanti ai bordi della città* [Orbital roads. Two wanderers on the margins of the city], 2010; Gabriella Kuruville, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene* [Milan, so far so good], 2012. Rome: Emanuele Trevi, *Senza verso: un'estate a Roma* [Verseless: A summer in Rome], 2004; Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono* [Home is where I am], 2010; Tommaso Giartosio, *L'O di Roma* [The O in Rome], 2012; Nicolò Bassetti and Sapo Matteucci, *Sacro romano Gra* [Holy Roman Gra], 2013; Filippo La Porta, *Roma è una bugia* [Rome is a lie], 2014.
- (2) Works mostly set in rural or scarcely urbanized landscapes: Wu Ming 2, *Il sentiero degli dei* [The gods' path], 2010; Franco Arminio, *Terracame. Viaggio nei paesi invisibili e nei paesi giganti del Sud Italia* [Earth-flesh: A trip to Southern Italy's invisible and giant towns], 2011; Mirko Volpi, *Oceano Padano* [The Po Ocean], 2015.
  - (3) Collections of short texts on various urban and suburban environments: Stefania Scateni, ed., *Periferie. Viaggio ai margini della città* [Peripheries: A trip to the margins of the city], 2006 (contains texts by Gianni Biondillo on Milan, Giuseppe Montesano on Naples, Emidio Clementi on Bologna, Beppe Sebaste on Rome, Silvio Bernelli on Turin, and Nicola Lagioia on Bari); Angelo Ferracuti, *Andare, lavorare, camminare. L'Italia raccontata dai portalettere* [Going, working, walking. Italy narrated by its mailcarriers], 2015.

Needless to say, the corpus outlined above could be greatly expanded, with regard to both geography and chronology; although the launching of the *Contromano* series in 2004 did coincide with an apparent increase in the amount of literary tours and other place-based texts, there is no lack of relevant examples from the late 1990s or the early 2000s (e.g. Antonio Pascale, *La città distratta* [The distracted city], 1999, or Tiziano Scarpa, *Venezia è un pesce* [Venice is a fish], 2000). Arbitrary as it is, the present selection is nonetheless representative of different approaches to this text type, and at the same time it does allow us to identify a remarkable number of convergences. In the next sections I will address some of the most significant recurring traits, with a view to illustrating how the works at issue attempt to question and reframe the relationship between space, individuals, and society at large; in the conclusion I will then argue that, by uncovering a hidden rhetoric of space and by placing particular emphasis on subjective experience, all those works denote a common need to oppose the processes of increasing abstraction and homogenization at work in contemporary societies.

## 2 Touring and re-mapping

In his seminal essay “Walking in the City” (1984), Michel De Certeau famously established an opposition between two ways of framing urban space. On the one hand is the *view from above*, turning the subject – typically the “urbanist, city planner or cartographer” – into a mere “voyeur,” and the city into an abstract “simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices” (where “practices” stands for the concrete, sensory experience of everyday city life). On the other hand, the abstract and simplified perspective of the urban planner is contrasted with the perspective of walkers, “whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.” The practice of walking is further defined by De Certeau as a “process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian,” which can reveal something that is bound to be neglected by “visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions” – namely the concrete specificity and complexity of a given place, and its relationship with the everyday experiences of individual human beings.<sup>5</sup>

The contrast between the walker’s perspective and the “panoptical” view frequently adopted by architects and institutions is a leitmotif running throughout our corpus; in most of the selected texts, the walking tour of an area sets the basis for an open critique of contemporary urban and infrastructure planning and of its tendency to neglect the specificities of the context, thus overlooking the negative impact that abstract or inconsistent projects may have on the lives of actual human beings (as well as on the environment). Therefore, walking often becomes a tool for *seeking spatial justice* (Soja), i. e. for interrogating the inherent link between social justice and the institutional organization of space.<sup>6</sup> De Certeau’s influence is quite direct and visible at times, as shown for instance by the close rewriting of a passage from “Walking in the City” in Wu Ming 2’s *Il sentiero degli dei*, a work in which a long walk from Firenze to Bologna allows the protagonist (Gerolamo) to expose the human and environmental costs of the high-speed railway project:

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<sup>5</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 92–93, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Edward Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). An interesting theorization of spatial justice and “law’s spatial turn” has recently been provided by Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere* (London: Routledge, 2015).

On Repubblica.it, Gerolamo finds a photoreport on wind power stations. Enthusiastic captions on the spread of windmills accompany the pictures taken from above, from an airplane window. If the pictures had been taken from ground level, the very same towers would not only produce a different effect, a different perception – if the perspective changes, the landscape itself changes as well. Elevation transforms us into voyeurs, the street turns us into citizens.<sup>7</sup>

Alongside De Certeau, another direct influence on many of the selected works is *psychogeography*, a term indicating a set of theories centred on the impact of geographical environments on human feelings and behaviours. As suggested by its very title, Biondillo and Monina's *Tangenziali* [Orbital roads] is heavily influenced by one of the main examples of contemporary psychogeography, namely Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital* (2002), narrating the author's pilgrimage around London's M25: "after all it wasn't even our idea, but rather an Italian cover version of the much more ambitious *London Orbital* by Iain Sinclair, deservedly considered as the current master of psychogeography."<sup>8</sup> While Biondillo and Monina's psychogeographical tour aims to expose the flaws of suburban planning in Milan, with special regard to its "snobbish indifference to the context," similar points can be found in several other texts from the corpus: in the collective volume *Periferie*, for instance, a character from Sebaste's Roman story "created an artwork in the Corviale area in which she invited architects and city planners to learn from the local dwellers, instead of laying down the law from a distance and on paper only"<sup>9</sup> – an idea that encapsulates the spirit of the book as a whole, which (as stated by Scateni in her preface) is based on an opposition between the authors' direct experience of Italian peripheries on the one hand, and the abstract projects developed by institutions and city planners on the other.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, La Porta states that "what we need is an urban strategy aiming to promote a *new sense of place*. We should inform the institutions that we do not want *great works* or *great projects*, which tend to demean the sense of day-to-day dwelling and the specific needs of individuals and small communities."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Wu Ming 2, *Il sentiero degli dei* (Portogruaro: Ediciclo, 2010), 80 [My translation]. Cf. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92: "His elevations transfigures him into a voyeur."

<sup>8</sup> Gianni Biondillo and Michele Monina, *Tangenziali* (Milano: Guanda, 2010), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Beppe Sebaste, "Roma. Sulle barricate di Tor Fiscale," in *Periferie*, ed. Stefania Scateni (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2006), 49–64, 55.

<sup>10</sup> "Non mi risulta che ci sia stato un politico che si sia 'avventurato' in una delle periferie delle nostre città" (Scateni, *Periferie*, vii). [My translation]

<sup>11</sup> Filippo La Porta, *Roma è una bugia* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2014), 109. [My translation]

The reference to the “specific needs of individuals” highlights another typical feature of the walking tour as a text type – its inherently personal, subjective nature. La Porta explicitly presents his work as a “very personal map,” focussing on “the neighborhoods that I am most familiar with, and which somehow represent a shared truth about the city.” Igiaba Scego’s map is equally subjective, based as it is on the overlap between a hand-drawn map of Mogadishu and a series of post-its referring to personal memories of Rome: “On the other [post-its] I wrote names of neighborhoods, squares, monuments: Stadio Olimpico, Trastevere, Stazione Termini, and so on. I stuck them all on my paper Mogadishu. After that, despite being bad at drawing, I tried to draw my memories.”<sup>12</sup> Scego’s collage is indeed a valid example of what Caroline Herbert has defined as “lyric maps,” while discussing the use of hand-drawn maps of Karachi – as opposed to the “official [i. e. institutional] renderings of space” – by Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie, in her 2002 novel *Kartography*.<sup>13</sup> Of course, such a personal take on cartography often serves broader purposes – in Scego, for instance, it opens up to a discussion of Italy’s often overlooked colonial past; in La Porta, as mentioned above, it stands in contrast to the impersonal, abstract perspective often taken by city planners. Even an extremely different work such as Mirko Volpi’s *Oceano Padano* displays a similar claim of subjectivity: “I was born in Nosadello, like nobody.”<sup>14</sup> This statement clearly reverses the famous opening line of Erik Satie’s autobiography (“je m’appelle Erik Satie comme tout le monde”), and – perhaps more pertinently – that of Walter Siti’s *Troppi paradisi* (“my name is Walter Siti, like everyone’s”), a novel in which particular attention is paid to the homogenizing effects of globalization; and indeed, the personal geography outlined in Volpi’s book, animated as it is by a strong sense of belonging to the Po valley, is meant above all as an admittedly reactionary (if ironical) counterbalance to globalization as a threat to local identities. Yet another take on subjectivity is represented by Emanuele Trevi’s *Senza verso*, which begins by showing a home-made map of the small area of Rome where the narrator’s walks take place; Trevi’s *flânerie* is mostly a way of coping with the death of a friend, Roman poet Pietro Tripodo, and of capturing his “human singularity”, his “existing without resembling anyone,”<sup>15</sup> by exploring the emotional resonances of places that are somehow connected to his memory.

<sup>12</sup> Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2010), 34. [My translation]

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Caroline Herbert, “Lyric maps and the legacies of 1971 in Kamila Shamsie’s *Kartography*,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47.2 (2011): 159–172, 169.

<sup>14</sup> Mirko Volpi, *Oceano Padano* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2015), 91. [My translation]

<sup>15</sup> Emanuele Trevi, *Senza verso. Un’estate a Roma* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2004), 93. [My translation]



Despite widely differing in their tone, scope, and purpose, the texts mentioned above (and, more generally, all of our corpus texts) assign a similar function to the everyday practice of walking – that of illustrating a more personal, concrete, and authentic relationship to space, as opposed to the simplifying abstractions underlying official and institutional geographies. As first established by Charlotte Linde and William Labov in their 1975 essay “Spatial Networks as a Site for the Study of Language and Thought,” the *tour* and the *map* can be seen as the two basic strategies for organizing spatial information; “in contrast to the map view, the tour simulates the embodied experience of a traveler.”<sup>16</sup> In the vast majority of our corpus texts, those two opposite modes are linked in a circular relationship: the walking tour is conceived in the first place as an alternative to preexisting official maps, while at the same time opening up to a creative remapping of space, whose main aim is to redefine the relationship between actual individuals and their geographical environment. “The Map, however accurate, is not the Territory,” writes La Porta, paraphrasing the title of Houellebecq’s *La Carte et le Territoire*<sup>17</sup>; a point that is also implied in such programmatic titles as *Roma è una bugia* [Rome is a lie] or *Milano non è Milano* [Milan is not Milan]. The gap between reality and representation can only be filled by creating a different kind of map, based on the direct sensory experience provided by a subjective tour of the territory. As suggested by La Porta’s previously mentioned pairing of the “specific needs of individuals” and those of “small communities,” subjective tours are also often meant to set the basis for a new, place-based sense of community, whereby (as De Certeau puts it) the “swarming mass” usually envisioned by ambitious city plans is replaced by a “collection of singularities;”<sup>18</sup> quoting Kuruvilla’s account of daily life in the multiethnic via Padova area in Milan, “I leave my personal block of everybody, and I go to my personal bar of everybody. ‘Mine’ means ‘ours’: it isn’t private but it’s always public, in this neighborhood.”<sup>19</sup>

**16** The definition is taken from Marie-Laure Ryan, “Space,” in *the living handbook of narratology* (last modified April 22, 2014), accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/space>. See also Charlotte Linde and William Labov, “Spatial Networks as a Site for the Study of Language and Thought,” *Language* 51 (1975): 924–939.

**17** La Porta, *Roma è una bugia*, 106.

**18** De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

**19** Gabriella Kuruvilla, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2012), 12–13. [My translation]



### 3 Questioning boundaries

In “Spatial Stories,” an essay in many ways complementary to “Walking in the City,” De Certeau states that “there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers [...]; by considering the role of stories in delimitation, one can see that the primary function is to *authorize* the establishment, displacement, or transcendence of limits.”<sup>20</sup> This is also a crucial aspect in the remapping of space performed by our corpus texts, most of which are mainly set in liminal or relatively uncharted areas where official boundaries can be directly experienced and questioned. This is, after all, a recurring feature of the genre outside Italy as well, as exemplified by works like Sinclair’s *London Orbital* or Philippe Vasset’s *Un livre blanc* [A white book, 2007], where the narrator sets out to personally explore fifty “white zones” (uncharted areas) in the National Geographical Institute map covering Paris and its banlieue. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on the two different kinds of border that are most frequently addressed in our Italian corpus.

The first kind of border is the one conventionally separating city centre, periphery/hinterland and countryside. Walking tours and direct observation of liminal areas often lead our authors to conclude that the line between centre and periphery is, in fact, becoming more and more blurred: “there is a constant transformation of the periphery into the city, and perhaps the other way round” (Sebaste on Rome); “maybe the very idea of the periphery is now obsolete, at least to some extent, at least in Turin” (Bernelli on Turin); “you are almost in the very centre of the city, but you live in a mutilated periphery” (Kuruville, Milan).<sup>21</sup> This is part of the phenomenon that has been labelled by Edward Soja as *regional urbanization*:

almost everywhere, suburbia and suburban ways of life are changing, becoming more dense and heterogeneous, more like what the urban used to be. [The extension of the density gradient] points to the increasing erosion of the formerly relatively clear boundary between the urban and the suburban, a marked homogenization of the urban landscape from center to periphery.<sup>22</sup>

As pointed out by Biondillo with regard to Milan, this homogenizing process leads to the creation of city-regions, levelling the differences between the

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<sup>20</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. respectively Sebaste, “Roma,” 49; Silvio Bernelli, “Torino. La nuova periferia è in centro,” in *Periferie*, ed. Scateni, 82; Kuruville, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene*, 160. [My translation]

<sup>22</sup> Edward Soja, “Regional Urbanization and the End of the Metropolis Era,” in *The New Blackwell Companion to the City*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 679–689, 684.

metropolis and its hinterland: “The real Milan is now one single immense city. Sesto San Giovanni, Rho, Rozzano, Cologno Monzese, San Donato, and the whole hinterland around Milan, are now calcified into one homogeneous whole; it is a city-region, covering the whole province and beyond.”<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, regional urbanization does not always follow a consistent and homogeneous pattern, as shown by the phenomenon of urban sprawl – i. e. the formation of lower-density suburban areas in which the line between urbanized and rural landscapes becomes indistinct, due to the absence of a structured urban plan. Urban sprawl in Rome and Milano is a recurring theme in our texts – in La Porta’s *Roma è una bugia*, San Basilio is defined as a “semi-rural suburb,” a “half-deserted area, more or less abandoned, not-yet countryside or city”<sup>24</sup>; similarly, in *Tangenziali*, Milan’s chaotic development generates areas in which “industrial facilities” are randomly interspersed with “old farmsteads,” and where “lush courgettes” can be “grown less than a meter away from a daily deposit of particulate matter.”<sup>25</sup>

On a different level, another frequently questioned border is the one separating the former imperial centre and the colonial periphery, as reflected for instance by the collective denial of the colonial past and by the ghettoization of ethnic minorities. This issue is particularly prominent in post-migration authors such as Gabriella Kuruville (born in Milan to an Indian father and an Italian mother) and Igiaba Scego (born in Rome to Somali parents), whose works deconstruct and challenge Eurocentric geographical prejudices in various ways. As mentioned above, a fine case in point is provided by the opening episode of Scego’s *La mia casa è dove sono* – the narrator blends Mogadishu and Rome into one multi-layered personal map, thus highlighting the link between Italy, its colonial past, and its multiethnic present. At the same time, Scego’s map also illustrates the notion that identities can be based on a dynamic and inclusive relationship to space, rather than a static and univocal one; in other words, they have far more to do with *routes* (migrations and connections between places) than with *roots* (static attachment to one single place).<sup>26</sup> As Scego states at the end of the book, “my map is not a coherent one. It is centre, but it is also periphery. It is Rome, but it is also

<sup>23</sup> Gianni Biondillo, “Milano. Sai dov’è?,” in *Periferie*, ed. Scateni, 7. [My translation]

<sup>24</sup> La Porta, *Roma è una bugia*, 95.

<sup>25</sup> Biondillo and Monina, *Tangenziali*, 130 and 293.

<sup>26</sup> On the opposition between routes and roots with regard to identity construction, cf. in particular James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Mogadishu. It is Igiaba, but it is you as well.”<sup>27</sup> A similar defamiliarizing effect is produced by several passages in Kuruvilla’s *Milano, fin qui tutto bene*, in which Milan and India are merged within the narrator’s personal geography: “strange shop: it reminds me of the kiosks selling spirits on the dusty roads of Kerala”; “a traffic similar to the Indian one, in its lawless street chaos”; “the young gipsy reminds me of the Rajasthani women selling silverware and clothes on the beaches of Kovalam.”<sup>28</sup>

Kuruvilla’s questioning of boundaries also involves an open critique of the stereotypes surrounding multiethnic areas in Milan, with special regard to the widespread habit of labelling them as ghettos or “no-go zones.” First of all, Kuruvilla’s narrative tour around via Padova – one of the neighborhoods most densely populated by immigrants – debunks the myth that native Italians have been forced to leave the area:

I will never go back to those shop keepers who attached stickers on their windows, with a Confederate-like flag and the slogan: “Let’s take Milan back.” And to be honest, I really don’t understand what they are supposed to take back: via Padova has over 400 business enterprises, of which more than 300 are Italian, and almost 100 are foreign. Three against one, then.<sup>29</sup>

Besides, via Padova is depicted by Kuruvilla as a place characterized by a strong sense of community, which is currently lacking in other parts of the city: “‘Mine’ means ‘ours’: it isn’t private but it’s always public, in this neighborhood”; “I live in a place where everybody greets and talks to each other; it’s a constant chatter here, in every language”; “this neighborhood is still part of a metropolis, but looks like a small town.”<sup>30</sup>

In all of the works mentioned above, the narrator’s embodied experience of specific places is used to denounce official hierarchizations of space as a way to hide or deny more complex truths –for instance, the administrative distinction between city centre and periphery does not hold true, when confronted with the lack of a structured plan underlying urbanization patterns; likewise, the artificial boundaries separating natives from immigrants are easily dismantled by way of embracing a more inclusive perspective on the notions of identity and community. In short, the function assigned to liminality is an ideal example of how the subjective remapping of space can open up to broader social and

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<sup>27</sup> Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono*, 160.

<sup>28</sup> Kuruvilla, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene*, 20, 27, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Kuruvilla, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene*, 21–22.

<sup>30</sup> Kuruvilla, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene*, 12–13, 6, 17.

political implications; as will be detailed in the next section, the same applies to another recurring feature in the selected texts, which can be subsumed under the category of *spectrality*.

## 4 Abandoned places, nonfunctional objects, and spectral metaphors

In the prelude to *L'O di Roma*, Tommaso Giartosio reports his meeting with a friend, an architect and performer named Piccio:

With a few friends he founded the “Stalker” group. In 1995 they carried out a tour of Rome, a four-day walking circumnavigation along the hazy borders of the city, among abandoned areas and clandestine vegetable gardens and wrecks of towers, on the edge of railway tracks. Even today, in 2009, I can feel that the Stalkers relate to me. Their initiatives are always political –discovering the territory immediately becomes rethinking it, re-planning it in dialogue with communities and institutions; but at the same time, their engagement is based on aesthetic, almost lyrical grounds. They consider walking as an art, which triggers the primary feelings of intimacy, childhood, and the unconscious.<sup>31</sup>

Many of the principles animating the Stalker group clearly apply to our corpus texts as well: walking as an aesthetic and political practice, the link between geography and emotions, the importance of liminal areas and the “hazy borders of the city,” as well as the special attention paid to the incongruous juxtaposition of industrial and rural micro-landscapes (the “clandestine vegetable gardens” scattered on the fringes of the city). The present section will focus on another key feature foregrounded by the Stalkers’ initiatives, namely the symbolic role assigned to “abandoned areas,” decrepit buildings, ruins, and other types of obsolete or non-functional objects.<sup>32</sup>

With specific regard to buildings, at least three macro-categories can be identified in the selected texts, the most substantial one being represented by post-industrial relics. “Rusty gates of factories that are not active anymore, where nothing is left to commemorate a not-so-remote successful past; the Falck factories in Sesto San Giovanni, the former industrial areas in Bagnoli and in Bari-Modugno, the Bovisa gasometers in Milan [...] An idea of modernity that has been defeated by time” (Clementi in *Periferie*)<sup>33</sup>; “Here we are, on

<sup>31</sup> Tommaso Giartosio, *L'O di Roma* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2012), 11.

<sup>32</sup> On the “aesthetics of abandonmen” in contemporary Italian place writing, see also Baldi, “Raccontare la città,” 70–74.

<sup>33</sup> Biondillo, “Milano. Sai dov'è?,” 35.

the Northern edge of Sesto San Giovanni, well beyond the striking emptiness of the former Falck factories. [...] One third of Sesto's territory doesn't have a function anymore. [...] Under our eyes, these spaces are little more than a vacuum sprinkled with ruins, the ruins of the twentieth century" (Biondillo and Monina).<sup>34</sup> Several other texts in the corpus similarly abound with "factory wrecks invaded by weeds," "small deserted factories," and "factories abandoned years ago, like totems of a suddenly lost civilization."<sup>35</sup> As pointed out by Biondillo and Monina, the emotional reaction triggered by this kind of landscape aptly illustrates the psychogeographical impact of deindustrialization, as well as of Italy's economic crisis: "it's the crisis manifesting itself in all its evidence – empty unused factories, abandoned areas–, it's the economic recession made into psychogeography."<sup>36</sup>

Next to post-industrial relics, two other forms of architectural decay are frequently touched upon. The first group encompasses the wrecks of rural civilization, which had been swept away by industrialization itself in many parts of Italy; this typology is, of course, particularly widespread in texts focussing on scarcely urbanized areas – from the "abandoned farmsteads" described by Biondillo-Monina and Wu Ming 2,<sup>37</sup> to the deserted mountain villages explored by Arminio in *Terracarne*. In those texts, rural and industrial vestiges often coexist side by side, thus picturing vast portions of Italy as multi-layered landscapes of ruins. Lastly, another important typology includes decrepit city buildings, or abandoned public spaces in urban contexts – e.g. the "deserted park" in the outskirts of Milan, which was originally planned for children but is now only populated by drug addicts (Biondillo and Monina)<sup>38</sup>; or the "open-air slums" in the Corvetto area, as well as the "ramshackle houses" with "worn-out walls and crumbling walkways" inhabited by Kuruvilla's via Padova immigrants.<sup>39</sup> However, ruined buildings are not the only instances of non-functionality in the corpus texts; a similar role is played by unused objects and old tools, as well exemplified by Arminio's meeting with the "man who collected the objects of rural civilization" and with another collector of "obsolete

<sup>34</sup> Biondillo and Monina, *Tangenziali*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. respectively Bernelli, "Torino," 74; La Porta, *Roma è una bugia*, 115; Nove, *Milano non è Milano*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Biondillo and Monina, *Tangenziali*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> Cf., for instance, *Tangenziali*, 78 ("an abandoned farmstead, with a decrepit roof. One of the several scattered over the outskirts of Milan – true monuments in ruins"); Wu Ming 2, *Il sentiero degli dei*, 35 ("some isolated farmsteads, often in ruins"), 107 ("scattered ruins").

<sup>38</sup> Biondillo and Monina, *Tangenziali*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Kuruvilla, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene*, 144, 6, 14.

objects,” embodying the author’s conviction that “we need places in which some space and value are still assigned to spiders, rusty keys, and dogs.”<sup>40</sup> The same applies to Nove’s description of “buried offices” and “machines abandoned years ago” in the foundations of Milan’s Stazione Centrale, or even to the countless references to waste products and landfills in works focussing on the outskirts of Rome and Milan.<sup>41</sup>

All the buildings and objects mentioned above are foregrounded as a reminder of the environmental impact of old and new urbanization, but also as metaphors of the human cost of those processes, which always imply – as pointed out once again by De Certeau – “a rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with in this way [i. e. according to ‘speculative and classificatory operations’], and so constitutes the ‘waste products’ of a functionalist administration”<sup>42</sup>; the “one or two forgotten generations” of retired factory workers evoked by Biondillo and Monina in relation to post-industrial landscapes are indeed a fine case in point.<sup>43</sup> The symbolic process at issue here does coincide with the prevailing function which, according to Francesco Orlando, has been assigned to obsolete objects in the literary imagination since the late eighteenth century – that of reminding us of the dark side of progress, of its relentless disposal of everything or everyone that does not comply with criteria of efficiency and functionality.<sup>44</sup> In this respect, Orlando’s model has many significant (if unexplored) convergences with the notion of *spectrality*, which has recently been the subject of increasing theoretical attention.<sup>45</sup> Spectrality studies mainly focus on the cultural significance of a broad variety of tropes, spanning from ghosts and other supernatural presences to “forgotten and despised areas, abandoned buildings or empty rooms”<sup>46</sup>;

<sup>40</sup> Franco Arminio, *Terracame* (Milano: Mondadori, 2011): 89, 20, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. for instance Biondillo and Monina, *Tangenziali*, 51 (on the old Falck landfill in Sesto San Giovanni); Giartosio, *L’O di Roma*, 43–44 (on the “Monte dei Cocci” in the Testaccio area); Bassetti and Matteucci, *Sacro romano Gra* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2013), 41–145 (on the Malagrotta landfill).

<sup>42</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 94.

<sup>43</sup> Biondillo and Monina, *Tangenziali*, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Francesco Orlando, *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places and Hidden Treasures* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 67–206 in particular. Orlando’s book is also mentioned in Baldi, “Raccontare la città,” 73.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds., *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), and Esther Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Roger Luckhurst, “The Contemporary London Gothic and the Limits of the ‘Spectral Turn’” in *The Spectralities Reader*, ed. del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, 75–88, 77.

as highlighted by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, spectral metaphors are typically employed “to effect revisions of history and/or reimaginings of the future in order to expose and address the way certain subjectivities have been marginalized and disavowed in order to establish and uphold a particular norm, as well as the way such subjectivities can never be completely erased but insist on reappearing to trouble the norm.”<sup>47</sup>

The examples discussed in this section illustrate how spectrality can become part of a broader claim for spatial justice, by drawing our attention towards the forgotten, disturbing presences lying on the fringes of neoliberal geographies. Not by chance, descriptions of ruined buildings and obsolete objects often coexist in our texts with references to ghosts – “you can now wander about small towns like a ghost among ghosts,” writes Arminio in *Terracarne*; other occurrences include, for instance, the chapter in Cucchi’s *La traversata di Milano* titled “I fantasmi in trattoria” [The ghosts in the trattoria] (focussing on the largely deserted via Conte Rosso), Giartosio’s description of the Testaccio area in Rome as a “ghost city,” as well as the uncharted “ghost road” trodden by Gerolamo between Firenzuola and Traversa, in Wu Ming 2’s *Il sentiero degli dei*.<sup>48</sup> It is important to underline, in this regard, that spectral metaphors are not only a way to evoke a forgotten past, but can also open up to “reimaginings of the future” (cf. del Pilar Blanco and Peeren). Arminio’s voyage to the spectral towns of Southern Italy is not animated by nostalgia, but rather by the idea that the revitalization of those deserted places might be an alternative to unsustainable urbanization, and an ideal antidote to Italy’s (and Europe’s) crisis: “I walk through towns to see the signs of the plague, but also those of a future healing; the strange thing nowadays is that the future is coming from behind, it is not generated by the vanguards but from the rear.”<sup>49</sup> Likewise, Kuruvilla and La Porta celebrate the citizens’ creative dialogue with suburban ghosts and ruins as an everyday practice of resistance: “by inhabiting decrepit houses and taking over deserted shops, the immigrants allowed this street to live again”; “the local inhabitants make unpredictable use of the solutions imposed on them, they redirect the original plans – a molecular form of resistance which shouldn’t be idealized, but still builds democracy on a daily basis.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, “Spectral Subjectivities: Gender, Sexuality, Race/Introductio,” in *The Spectralities Reader*, 309–316, 309–310.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. respectively Arminio, *Terracarne*, 79; Giartosio, *L’O di Roma*, 47; Wu Ming 2, *Il sentiero degli dei*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Arminio, *Terracarne*, 125, 224.

<sup>50</sup> Kuruvilla, *Milano, fin qui tutto bene*, 45; La Porta, *Roma è una bugia*, 101, 110.



## 5 Conclusion: Literature and the human experience of space

In the previous sections, I have tried to highlight a series of recurring features in contemporary place-based Italian literature – walking tours as a remapping tool against abstract organizations or hierarchizations of space, the adoption of a subjective or even lyrical perspective on the geographical environment, the critique of artificial borders (be they visible or not) overlooking complex realities, and lastly the use of spectral metaphors to evoke agencies that have been marginalized by the logic of profit and functionality. While the first two features are equally present in all of the selected texts, the latter two only pertain to a vast majority of them – in Trevi's *Senza verso* and Volpi's *Oceano Padano*, for instance, the engagement with social and political issues is outweighed by personal memories (Trevi) or shunned in the name of an ironical (and consciously delusive) detachment from modern times (Volpi). Specificities aside, however, the whole of our corpus is characterized by a fundamental contrast, whereby the lived, sensory experience of specific places is opposed to the loss of a direct link between space and individual human beings in contemporary societies – be it due to abstract and unrealistic urban plans, to the alienating quality of city life, or to the homogenizing and delocalizing trends inherent to neoliberal globalization. Such a contrast is, of course, far from being an Italian peculiarity; on the contrary, it can only be fully understood from a comparative standpoint. The functions ascribed to spectral images are indeed a fine case in point: although it would be counter-productive to use the notion of spectrality in a generic and decontextualized way, the similarities to other European authors are particularly relevant, and should not be overlooked.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, it should be noted that the need to bridge the gap between the human experience of space and broader social, political or geographical phenomena is not only a recurring *topos* in

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<sup>51</sup> For instance, the use of spectrality to expose the marginalizing processes underlying neoliberal societies is a recurrent feature in English, French, and Spanish authors as well: cf. respectively Luckhurst, "The Contemporary London Gothic" and Henderson Downing, "Probably Psychogeographical in Love: Iain Sinclair and the City of Disappearances," *The Literary London Journal* 13 (2016): 37–51; Frédéric Martin-Achard, "Des promenades dans cette épaisseur de choses reconstruites: Introduction au récit périurbain (Bon, Rolin, Vasset)," *Compar(a)ison* 1 (2008): 5–27; Pablo Valdivia, "Literature, Crisis, and Spanish Rural Space in the Context of the 2008 Financial Recession," *Romance Quarterly* 64.2 (2017), forthcoming.

contemporary literature, but also a growing priority for a wide range of disciplines: from affective urbanism and urban ethnography to spatial justice and environmental studies.<sup>52</sup>

That being said, some general questions still remain to be answered – what is the role of literature within the framework of this broader paradigm shift? And more specifically, as obvious as this may sound, where does literariness lie in works such as the ones analyzed in the present study? In order to provide a tentative answer, I will briefly touch upon two functions that seem to be strictly related to the literary quality of the text type at issue here. First of all, due to their engagement with specific figurative devices, literary tours can unveil a hidden rhetoric of space; they can encourage the reader to investigate the deeper meaning of often neglected geographical signifiers, and to establish unexpected connections between them. Looked at from this perspective, particular landscapes, buildings, or objects can be revealed as *synecdoches*, linking the local dimension to far broader processes<sup>53</sup>; similarly (as discussed in relation to spectrality), they can be actively used as *metaphors*, uncovering aspects of contemporary life that would otherwise escape the realm of our daily experience. In this regard, place-based stories may serve as an exercise in vision, reeducating our eyes –and more generally our senses– to a closer perceptual relationship with space; the young co-protagonist of Gianfranco Rosi’s documentary *Fuocoammare* (2016), with his struggle to heal his “occhio pigro” [lazy eye], is indeed a fitting embodiment of this process. Secondly, the literary –and more precisely narrative– nature of the selected texts lies in their privileged link with experientiality, i.e. (following Fludernik’s definition) the “quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience;” place-based stories tap into shared cognitive parameters, as well as into the multi-layered emotional values individually or socially attached to space (Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling”), thus creating an otherwise unattainable connection between different human experiences.<sup>54</sup> In conclusion, it can be

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52 Cf. respectively: Ben Anderson and Adam Holden, “Affective urbanism and the Event of Hope,” *Space and Culture* 11 (2008): 142–159; Timothy Shortell and Evrick Brown eds., *Walking in the European City: Quotidian Mobility and Urban Ethnography* (London: Routledge, 2014); Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Spatial Justice*; and Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

53 Nosadello, the author’s hometown, is explicitly defined as a “synecdoche” in Volpi, *Oceano Padano*, 99–100. Cf. also Arminio, *Terracarne*, 332, on “investigating the world by focussing on a tiny part of it.”

54 See respectively Monika Fludernik, *Towards a “Natural” Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973). For

argued that the literariness of our corpus mainly lies in its specific take on figurative language and experientiality, underlying the authors' attempts to bridge the gap between our everyday spatial practices and the impersonal, levelling processes that regulate our lives from above.

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a recent discussion of the role of experience in Williams's model, cf. Paul Filmer, “Structures of Feeling and Socio-Cultural Formations: The Significance of Literature and Experience to Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture,” *British Journal of Sociology* 54.2 (2003): 199–219.